

Role of E-learning in Quality Assurance during COVID 19 Pandemic: Challenges and the Road Ahead

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Abstract

The global pandemic of COVID-19 has transformed the academic delivery mechanism from class room mode to the online /e-Learning mode. Most of the higher educational institutions and Universities transformed their infrastructure to cater to the challenges of academic delivery during the time of Pandemic. This paper has made an attempt to analyse the overall scenario, challenges, perspectives and the roadmap ahead to strengthen the health of higher educational institutions and to focus on enhancing the quality assurance of academics and allied areas in HEIs. The impact of COVID-19 on education during the lockdown period has been studied with a focus to understand the challenges and opportunities for HEIs. The current paper has focused on studying the status of higher education sector across India and made recommendations for improving the health of higher education and HEIs both from qualitative and quantitative dimensions. This paper has shared the recommendations for HEIs to enhance the overall effectiveness of the teaching learning process during the pandemic and post COVID-19 scenario.

Keywords: Online Education, E-Learning, HEIs, COVID-19, Quality Assurance, NAAC

Introduction

With about 40000 higher educational institutes (HEIs) in the country, India is one of the largest educational systems in the world with a lot of heterogeneity amongst the institutes in terms of their management, funding, infrastructure and the societal needs. Since 1994, NAAC has been taking up the quality assurance activities with a positive attitude to help in the growth of the institutes rather than being inspectors to find out faults in HEIs. In the recent past, NAAC has modified their format to assess HEIs with a motive to minimise the undue intervention by the visiting Peer Teams. These steps taken up by the NAAC will have far reaching effects on the teaching and as well as research activities of HEIs across India. In view of COVID-19 pandemic, visiting of peer teams to assess HEIs have been badly hampered. This also justifies the need and relevance of modified format launched by

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NAAC for assessment of HEIs, which allows 70% marks based on documents uploaded by the institutes.

Online or e-learning is not an entirely new concept to the world and to India as well. Distance Education in India is being imparted since long by various institutes including India Gandhi Open University (IGNOU), however, recent COVID19 pandemic had given a new paradigm to education called e-learning in higher education across all HEIs and the country has faced the challenges in the present unprecedented situation. Faculty, Laboratory staff, non-teaching staff members,

Administrators of education, Finance managing staff, Health staff, Hostel managers and other supporting staff are facing entirely new situation in discharging their duties effectively.

Students being at the centre to all stakeholders, the online teaching-learning activities are big challenge and the new environment of teaching learning had heavily affected them. Laboratory activities and workshop activities are one of the worst affected areas in the e-learning during the lockdown. However, some study material on how to perform laboratory experiments are available on the internet. Such study materials such as video clips or simulators can not be compensated as the credible replacement to the real time laboratory experiments performed in the laboratory, by the students of Science, Engineering, Medical and other similar areas of study.

In order to face the prevailing circumstances and to effectively deal with the new emerging situation, MHRD, Govt. of India (renamed as Ministry of Education) has been playing a very crucial role by providing free access to its number of knowledge networks including NDL with 4.5 crore documents, SWAYAM, MOOCS and many other skill development courses. Many publishers of books also shared their links of e-books with free access to students, researchers and faculty members. In the times of global pandemic of COVID-19, the regular interaction with students and their counselling is very important to help them combat against the uncertainty, confusion, stress, anxiety due to closure of institutes and cancellation of traditional classes, delay in academic sessions and its cumulative impact on their future career.

Impact of COVID-19 on Education during Lockdown

School closures due to COVID-19 pandemic have impacted over 154 Crore students across the globe as on 22 April 2020 (UNESCO). School closures

due to this pandemic have impacted over 32 Crore students across India as on 16th April 2020 (UNESCO). Based on World Bank information and Worldometer, 213 countries have been affected by the dreaded global pandemic of COVID-19.

Education has shifted to a new paradigm during COVID-19 due to prolonged lockdowns. Every activity was going on smoothly and in full swing, until the outbreak of COVID-19 pandemic which hit the education sector badly and it also hit the activities of all sectors including education sector at global level. In Pre-COVID-19 pandemic, part of the academic session, only some of the HEIs were able to complete the major portion of the prescribed syllabus. However, majority of the HEIs could not do so due to their different academic reasons. All the faculty members of the HEIs were suddenly asked to start teaching online, as this was the only viable alternative in the interest of students and in the interest of health aspects. For majority of the faculty members, it took some time to understand the technology and effective and optimum use of available resources. With the limited expertise and technical facilities available, the faculty members took it as a challenge and completed the teaching and continuous assessment by online teaching and supplying the study materials to the students in the form of pdf, ppt, scanned notes etc. using WhatsApp/email/Google Drive etc.

Uncertainty arose due to COVID-19 pandemic, forced the HEIs to frequent changes in their prescribed date of internal assessment examinations and end semester examinations. One of the worst affected are as in academics has been the Laboratory work, Project work of PG students and Experiment based research activities. Potential efforts are being made by the Faculty Members and supporting staff to help the students by utilizing teaching learning tools such as Learning Management System (LMS), power point presentation, pdf, WhatsApp, text message, phone calls, demonstration of Laboratory works by using

YouTube links. Also, HEIs made use of online resources for conducting important meetings such as Board of Studies (BoS), Board of Schools (BS), Academic Council (AC), University Court (UC), Executive Council (EC), Finance Committee (FC) etc. A sizeable number of HEIs are conducting online Seminars or Webinars, useful for students and scholars to refresh themselves. Also, the UGC prescribed Orientation Programmes and Refresher Courses mandatory for the promotion of faculty, are being conducted in online mode by several University Grants Commission-Human Resource Development Centres (UGC-HRDC) of HEIs across India.

COVID-19 pandemic has badly impacted our teaching learning activities including compromise in timely conduct of Internal Assessment Examinations and End Semester Examinations. Timely publication of Results has been another area of impact for undergraduate and postgraduate students. For Junior Semester students, promotions are given to next semester, on the basis of their performance in Continuous Assessment examination as per the directives of MoE, Govt. of India. In all such cases and in the interest of students, HEIs are forced to take decisions to ensure that no question of Zero Academic session arises due to the current pandemic. In spite of all the possible efforts by stakeholders, timely conduct of Entrance Examinations for admission to various academic programmes is still a challenge. Most of the HEIs had given up the idea of conducting traditional entrance exams and Interviews by physical presence of applicants and are opting for alternate ways of conducting the entrance exams with modified rules and regulations suitable for the current situation. Due to dynamic nature of pandemic behaviour and SOP in this regard, percentage of presence of non-teaching staff has been drastically reduced, which has badly impacted the timely publication of results and other activities of HEIs. This has further impacted the students willing to take admission in to higher

academic programmes, with special impact on those aspiring students who are willing to get admitted in other institutes rather than their present institutes of learning. In the new scenario, online entrance examinations based admission or Merit based admission are some of the options exercised by HEIs across India. Delay in publication of results is impacting the admission process too.

COVID-19 pandemic has badly impacted the research and extension activities in HEIs. Lack of effective face to face discussion for the preparation of Synopsis and Research proposals have impacted in terms of the quality and their delayed completion and submission in respect of new research scholars. For the enrolled research scholars, the pandemic has slowed down their speed of paper writing, their submission as well as the review process. A similar impact may be seen in case of project works of final semester postgraduate and graduate students as well. For the research scholars, postgraduate and undergraduate students at the verge of submissions of their Thesis or Dissertation, this pandemic have delayed the process. However, MHRD, Govt. of India had granted general extension of six months for submission. In spite of several efforts to resolve the issues related to students, uncertainty in examination and Admissions in B.Tech., PG, MPhil, PhD in the new session still a potential challenge.

National and International Status

In response to COVID-19 pandemic facing the entire globe, a number of agencies have taken initiatives and called for research proposals for students and researchers as stated below:

https://www.auf.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/AUF_AAP-COVID-19_EN.pdf

<https://www.iie.org/Programs/Emergency-Student-Fund/Current-Funding-Efforts>
<https://en.unesco.org/themes/education->

emergencies/coronavirus-school-closures

<https://en.unesco.org/news/covid-19-10-recommendations-plan-distance-learning-solutions>

<https://en.unesco.org/themes/education-emergencies/coronavirus-school-closures/nationalresponses>

<https://en.unesco.org/themes/education-emergencies/coronavirus-school-closures/solution>

www.iesalc.unesco.org/en/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/COVID-19-EN-090420-2.pdf

<https://www.auf.org/nouvelles/actualites/covid-19-lauf-met-gratuitement-a-disposition-de-etablissements-membres-plateforme-de-formation-a-distance-favoriser-continue-pedagogique/>

<https://www.auf.org/nouvelles/actualites/lauf-lancebulletin-de-veille-electronique-orientee-recherche-covid-19/>

<https://www.aau.org/covid-19/>

<https://aiubloggroup.wordpress.com/>

<https://www.aacu.org/events/democracy-despite-disruption-improving-student-voter-engagement-through-pedagogy>

<https://www.aacu.org/events/shaping-teaching-and-learning-address-global-health-crisis-covid-19-and-global-health>

<https://www.bahamasvirtuallearning.com/>

<https://ched.gov.ph/blog/2020/03/12/guidelines-for-the-prevention-control-and-mitigation-of-the-spread-of-the-2019-novel-coronavirus-acute-respiratory-disease-in-higher-education-institutions/>

<https://ched.gov.ph/wp-content/uploads/CHED-COVID-2019-Advisory-No.-1.pdf>

<https://www.chea.org/covid-19-resources-institutions->

and-accreditors

<https://www.coe.int/en/web/education/covid-19>

Countywide lockdowns, social distancing, restricted global travel, work from home and recurrences of COVID-19 is a new normal globally. COVID-19 has significant impact on the number of internationally mobile students opting for education in the countries such as Canada, UK, Germany, USA, France and Australia, where many of them have either deferred their admission or have given up their plan to study overseas. As a result of high degree of uncertainty, the education sector stakeholders namely students, parents, HEIs and investors are facing disruptions.

Due to COVID-19 pandemic, core education providers are forced to go online. In China, the educational content is being delivered through Live class, free technological tools, partnership and student-parent engagement using Webchat. Hongkong has been using Kido learning to provide online education to its students in Hongkong, UAE, UK, USA and India. The Global Indian International School (GIIS) educational technology system Edu ERP facilitates the virtual classroom services across India, Japan, Singapore and UAE. Also, Akash Digital and Byju's offered online education to a sizeable number of students across India. In UAE, GEMS Education executive is widely used to offer online e-learning to learners across the country. National University of Singapore (NUS) has made it compulsory to use e-learning tools and resources, to follow strict health and safety measures inside the campus and relaxation in grading criterion by removing the Satisfactory/Unsatisfactory in their grade sheet. Fee hikes are also restricted by the NUS. Global Educational Technology in higher education 'Coursera' is a free access tool having over 4000 courses ranging across 400 specializations. Another important tool 'I can read' for training in English language and literacy education has been launched by Singapore.

Many other freely available online study platforms have been launched by several countries namely; madrasa.org by UAE, TV and media broadcast lessons nationally from a classroom at Riyadh, Google classroom and hangouts to conduct classes by India and Singapore Student Learning Space (SSLS) launched by Singapore. Private partnerships for online education have also been explored like 'Adwaab' to design and offer lessons launched by Jordan and Du-Etisalat & Virgin mobile launched by UAE.

Role of E-learning and initiatives taken by MOE (Erstwhile MHRD), Govt. of India

Ministry of Human Resource Development (MHRD), Govt. of India; which was renamed as Ministry of Education (ME) recently, played a key role in handling the pandemic situation in education sector with special reference to HEIs. Ministry took a number of student friendly measures namely; You Tube/Simulation links based demonstration of laboratory experiments, General Promotion of Junior Semester students, sharing of various academic links for free. Also, a free hand was given to all HEIs to handle the situation in coordination and consultation with state governments. In the interest of Final Semester students and their future, the ministry instructed to all HEIs to go for examinations as mandatory requirement with the freedom given to all HEIs to take decision about the mode of examinations, online or offline in consultation with the stakeholders. NAAC-MHRD created a history, when Honorable Minister, MHRD, Govt. of India addressed the Heads and Faculty members of all HEIs across India. NAAC conducted a series of Webinars by inviting Eminent dignitaries and personalities including Governors of some states, in a welcome step, extremely helpful to enrich the participants in terms of their knowledge and exposure. These webinars were open to all HEIs across India. Ministry of Human Resource Development (MHRD), Govt. of India took many

initiatives during COVID-19 pandemic including the reduction of syllabus to compensate with the difficulties faced by students.

Relaxation of six months' time was granted by MHRD-UGC to MPhil and PhD scholars for submission of Thesis/Dissertation. Under the leadership of MHRD, Govt. of India, UGC and AICTE have taken a number of initiatives including the study materials free access through online educational resources such as SWAYAM, MOOCS, Harvard Univ. links, KAUSHAL SETU. Several other free download educational resources have been shared by concerned owners such as www.pdfdrive.net, ProQuest, Wiley, McGraw Hill, online.infobaselearning.com, YouTube, Local TV Channel telecasted Video Lectures prepared by Faculty of concerned HEIs. Another highly commendable initiative taken by the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare (MoHFW), Govt. of India is *Students counseling through helpline 080-46110007*. MHRD has played a key role and leadership by issuing several instructions to HEIs to help the student community such as relaxation by Library for book return, extension of the last date for fee payment, free Medical help, downloading of Aarogya Setu app by every citizen, continuous monitoring and support to be extended by University and College Administration to students including the those stranded in hostels due to nationwide lockdowns.

Academic Challenges Ahead

COVID-19 pandemic has posed a number of challenges in the various sectors of education including higher education. One of the biggest challenges is to motivate the students to adopt the new paradigm in education, especially to develop positive attitude amongst the students towards e-learning. In order to motivate the students, institutional support to students at different levels is a primary requirement. Providing flexibility in terms of choice of subjects, flexibility in the timings

of online classes, flexibility in the last dates of assignments, online tests, project dissertation preparation are the few steps amongst many other measures that can be taken up by stakeholders in the interest of students. Frequent interaction between faculty members and students through mobile phones, Whatsapp, email video call etc. are challenges towards motivation of students. Uploading variety of course study materials at one location and their easy access is another challenge to provide ease of learning to the students and to motivate them for regular interaction online.

Another challenge for Teaching and Learning Activities is to generate and keep ample interest to study and to explore academic confidence in them, which had been hampered due to entirely new environment of teaching and learning, leading to disinterest towards it and sometimes even frustration is developed amongst the students. All stakeholders of higher education are facing one of the biggest challenges as to how to develop positive and cooperative attitudes amongst the students towards e-learning. In this endeavour, the quality of students, their background subjects of study and quality of their study are very important. Crucial and relevant steps should be taken up by all HEIs across the entire nation.

There are many practical challenges related to parents, society and HEIs to face the new paradigm shift in higher education. Due to diversified standards of living, it is a challenge for Parents to provide atmosphere at home that is conducive and favourable for their spouse to study and learn with enthusiasm. Also, due to uneven internet connectivity, lack of good quality devices and limitation of their numbers available for learning, conflicts arising due to overlapping of family and office work schedules are other challenges for the students. Students, faculty members and staff members' lack of experience and training with the online teaching technologies and students might face difficulties in learning and understanding the

study materials that require technical demonstration. Sharing of updated study materials by the faculty is another challenge in online education system, as it may invite legal issues on uploading. Developing effective mechanism learner centered system to take students' feedback, course learning outcomes, stress management, counselling and to conduct Online tests, assignments, discussion forums and end semester real-time semester examinations are other similar challenges in near future.

For the project and research works related to UG, PG students and PhD scholars, developing sufficient and efficient centralized support system such as free access to common software and other research supporting application is another challenge at institutional level. In e-learning courses, management of time with mutual consent and convenience is another challenge to students, parents and instructors for substantial outcomes. Vigorous presence by faculty members with rigorous interaction between students and faculty through dashboard or by other means is a very important component towards continuous engagement and a challenge towards effective and interesting teaching-learning system. For the HEIs having large number of Temporary / Guest instructors, it is another important challenge and necessity to train them for the effective use of technology as well as timely disbursement of their remunerations for maintaining the quality of teaching and learning process.

How to run online courses? Faculty members are untrained; some others are unwilling/reluctant to learn new technologies. Some other challenges are to ensure stable network facilities to students, faculty and staff members, lack of awareness with parents, lack of stable internet and other Infrastructure facilities in remote areas of the country with special reference to North Eastern India and Hilly regions of India. Conducting effective Laboratory classes for all semesters in UG

and PG levels and Project classes for Final semesters and Monitoring of conduct of Online examination are one of the biggest challenges to ensure that it is free from copying in view of possible misuse of available technologies and media, easily accessible to all. Privacy issues of the users while conducting online classes is another big challenge. Quality of picture and clarity of sound is also a big challenge. Frequent Power cuts and unstable network connections disrupt the teaching-learning environment.

To fulfil changing nature of students with different expectations of facility and services for learning, more flexibility in teaching and learning and wider/effective use of technology are some important challenges in the near future. Another challenge is to impart the education which is not only relevant to their professional needs but also capable of providing employment and reality based education having application on ground. Time spent by online learners on internet is more than that of television. Imparting education to learners effectively, more opportunities for connected mobile learning and beyond traditional delivery of information are need of the hour. Another challenge for 21st century learners is the basic skill requirements for optimum use of learning tools. Lifelong learners are expected to have competency in Mathematics, knowledge of basic concepts of science and technology, digital competency, social and civic competency and the cultural awareness.

In order to develop and encourage blended learning facilities and services, meaningful integration of ICT infrastructure available in HEIs is another challenge, however, role of Human Teacher can never be replaced by any e-learning technology. Many tools for e-learning such as email, website based resources, Learning Management System (LMS), Open Educational Resources (OER), Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) and online discussion boards are readily available to the learners. In blended mode of teaching, the online

teaching can be a supplement of face-to-face teaching. For example the lectures recorded by faculty members can be viewed by the students, which can be followed by face to face interactions in the class room.

Higher Educational Institutes (HEIs) in India are expected to respond to the situation by making necessary organizational changes namely; to chalk out clear strategies based on the need and preference of target students, for execution in order to develop themselves as HEIs with quality infrastructure. HEIs can make selection of e-learning resources and tools for all types of active learning such as inquiry, discussion, practice and collaboration. Effective and optimum use of the existing infrastructure may be done by many ways including their re-designing. Another challenge is to redefine the quality of infrastructure, support to the faculty, role of academic management, coordination by stakeholders, policy initiatives to be taken and support by the government.

Opportunities

COVID-19 pandemic has provided us many opportunities as well, few of them being opportunity to learn new technology for teaching-learning, organizing Online activities such as teaching, Webinars/Conferences/Workshops/Short term courses/UGC-HRDC Online courses with lowest ever cost. Due to lockdowns, recurring expenditure such as the electric bills, water bills and transport expenditure reduced drastically. This has also reduced the expenditure on national and international academic visits by faculty members, organizing seminars, workshops, organizing meetings of academic bodies such as board of studies, boards of schools, academic council, and external examiners to conduct PG exams as well as MPhil/PhD viva voce examinations. Above discussed situations have resulted into an opportunity to HEIs as enhanced savings.

Road Ahead

1. Manufacturers of computers should be asked to produce all types of computers, whether Desktop or Laptop with HD Webcam integrated in it.
2. Signal strength to be improved 3G or 4G nationwide especially in the remote areas of the country including North East India.
3. Incentives may be given to the developers of Indigenous Apps to ensure security and safety of users from cyber-attacks.
4. For smooth and effective conduct of Online classes, Courses, webinars etc., ICT centres of HEIs should be given dedicated bandwidth facilities along with other facilities such as power back up and additional staff.
5. At least one dedicated studio may be established in all HEIs for recording of video lectures and other similar activities.
6. Improved internet connectivity is a pre-requisite, especially in remote and hilly areas for ease of access for the students community.
7. For conducting fair Online exams, monitoring of students should be ensured by using proper electronic gadgets for effective monitoring. Another alternate may be to develop additional infrastructure NICs and NIELITs to conduct exams.
8. Hands on training of Students, Faculty, and Technical staff, Laboratory staff, Finance, Hostel and other stakeholders should be conducted to handle the situation in a better way.
9. Re-appropriation of Budget heads may be necessary in order to develop e-learning

infrastructure for more effective and conducive teaching learning environment.

10. Motivation to students, staff and other stakeholders to effective and optimum use of existing resources. Brief and to the point guidelines may be given for awareness and to perform their tasks with care.
11. Considering e-learning as a new normal, developing technological road map and need based intervention in policy in the interest of students can be made by the government.

Conclusion

COVID-19 pandemic has given us new challenges to learn new technologies and know their effective use.

- E-learning style, technological stability, hands on training to all stakeholders and time management with positive attitude are some of the very important challenges that need to be addressed by HEIs in order to achieve e-learning outcomes successfully.
- In order to aim and achieve higher targets in academics and research, faculty members should be provided the e-learning platform ready to use with the support of technical staff. This will ensure the faculty members to solely focus on teaching and research rather than getting engaged in providing technical support to students. This will prevent from wasting of time and frustration amongst academics fraternity.
- Uncertainty prevailing in teaching and research has prompted the Administration, Faculty, Non-Teaching Staff, Library, and Medical staff, Hostel Managers to think OUT OF THE BOX to handle the new situation and ensure that all activities go on in the interest of Students.

- Based on performance by swift corrective measures being taken up by Ministry of Education, Govt. of India, will certainly not only win over it, but India will be successful to convert the challenges in the Education sector as Opportunities.
- In view of the prevailing pandemic situation, we need to accept SOP, issued by Govt. of India as New Normal for future academic activities and etiquettes.

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